

LEAGUE PLAYERS 'TAKE THE GAME TOO SERIOUSLY'

By **ROBERT OXBY**

THE success of the non-League clubs in the third round of the F A Cup has brought a much-needed touch of romance to the game. It has also raised the question whether the gulf between top and minor clubs is as wide as everyone thought.

Chris Kelly, the Leatherhead striker, whose goal eliminated Brighton on Saturday, said: "There is not much difference in individual skill, but the League clubs have the edge in team-work. Their trouble is that they take the game too seriously."

Kelly's apt assessment suggests that what happened on Saturday was not a lucky accident — that there really was a connection between five surprising results and the "pressures" we hear so much about.

A First Division side, however experienced, is still a collection of young men, and the Cup places them under the stress of living up to their reputations. When they fail to do so quickly, they become confused and uncertain.

Players were nervous

I talked to two of the Middlesbrough players just before their match against Wycombe Wanderers on Saturday. Their attitude caused me to tell colleagues in the Press box that I thought the seeds of a surprise result had already been sewn.

The players, both of whom have had representative honours, declared how nervous they were about playing on the sloping Loakes Park pitch. "Wycombe know all about it, but it's going to take us ages to adjust," they said.

Middlesbrough's unease was further demonstrated by their 15 minute warm-up in which they kept hitting the ball up and down the slope, and the readiness with which Jack Charlton, their manager, subsequently blamed the pitch for Middlesbrough's unhappy performance.

Yet Dave Underwood, the former Fulham goalkeeper, who had played frequently on the Wycombe ground, said: "When

you are playing, you are barely conscious of the slope. I have noticed bigger effects on some First Division grounds which tilt considerably."

The psychological nature of Middlesbrough's failure to defeat the Rothmans Isthmian League club was given an extra twist by Brian Lee, the Wycombe manager, whose Cup preparation had been unusual, to say the least.

Psychological victory

For weeks, Mr Lee had emphasised that Middlesbrough would overwhelm his team with their superior skills. As a result, neither the Wycombe players nor the 12,000 crowd hoped for anything more splendid than the avoidance of humiliation.

Mr Lee achieved a double psychological breakthrough. While his players were stung into a determination to prove him wrong, Middlesbrough, in adverse conditions, were weighed down with the knowledge that they were expected to show all the arts of the game.

They took refuge in defensive tactics—their 4-4-2 formation underlined their concern — and carefree Wycombe flung everything at them and almost won. Small wonder that Mr Charlton professed himself so delighted to have escaped defeat.

Mr Lee has demonstrated that managers and coaches give too little attention to the mental approach of their players. There are deep, uncharted areas here which have nothing to do with relative skills and status.

Wycombe's brief flourish will probably end tonight on the lush, green acres of Ayresome Park, but the true significance of their near-triumph on Saturday should be remembered by every League manager.